[ACTIVITY TITLE]

Activity Monitoring, Evaluation, and Learning Plan

Approved Date: [e.g. September 1, 2023]
Version: [1]

Activity Start and End Dates: [e.g. June 1, 2023 to May 31, 2028]
Total Estimated Cost: [$xxx,xxx]
AOR/COR/Activity Manager Name & Office:
Implemented by: [Implementing partner name]
Partners: [Sub-contractor/sub-awardee names]

Contents

About this Activity MEL Plan template:
This template provides a suggested outline, instructions, and expectations for the co-development of an Activity Monitoring, Evaluation, and Learning (MEL) plan between an implementing partner and USAID Mission. While it is designed primarily for the Local Works program, it may be helpful for any USAID activity, especially when working with partners new to USAID.

What is Required in a MEL Plan?**:**
USAID's ADS Chapter 201: Operational Policy for the Program Cycle contains all requirements for MEL Plans. The Local Works team has included the most relevant information here. ADS 201, page 80, states:

- **Activities must have an approved Activity MEL Plan in place before major implementation actions begin**. Implementing partner Project Managers should work with the COR/AOR and/or USAID Activity Manager to ensure that the Activity MEL Plan is consistent with and meets the data collection needs of the USAID Mission.
- For most awards, implementing partners must submit a proposed Activity MEL Plan to the COR/AOR in accordance with the guidelines in their award or agreement, often within 90 days of an award.

ADS 201 gives USAID and implementing partners a great deal of flexibility in what they choose to include in a MEL Plan. Currently, Activity MEL Plans require three sections (see ADS 201, page 81):

- **The activity's monitoring approach**, including monitoring processes, systems, and relevant performance indicators of the activity's outputs and outcomes, their baseline values (or plan for collecting baseline), and Performance Indicator Reference Sheets (PIRS).
- The activity's approach for establishing effective procedures for **collecting and responding to feedback from program participants** and reporting to USAID a summary of feedback and how the implementing partner addressed it.
- **Data management plan** (see ADS Chapter 579): As of July 2020, all activities that require a MEL plan also require a Data Management Plan (DMP) detailing data collection, management, and storage procedures; data privacy and security safeguards; and data dissemination and use considerations, to include data sharing practices and necessary legal provisions (informed consent, data sharing and use agreements, and licenses, as applicable). **This may be part of the AMELP, or a separate document.**

Given the strong focus on local leadership and learning in Local Works, Missions and partners should keep the following expectations for MEL Plans in mind:

- **Be Flexible:** Beyond the three required sections of the MEL Plan, Local Works encourages USAID Missions and implementing partners to maximize the flexibility in ADS 201 to determine together what sections of the MEL Plan are most useful and relevant to them. This may include customizing this suggested MEL Plan template or developing a different template altogether.
- **Collaborate:** The Local Works program encourages the co-development of and revisions to MEL Plans between implementing partners, local stakeholders, activity participants and USAID Missions to the greatest extent possible.
- **Start with a Strong Plan:** The Local Works program encourages implementing partners to spend time thinking through the details of how they will monitor, evaluate, learn, and adapt throughout the activity, and to include these plans in this document. Investing time in making these plans at the beginning of the activity - and reflecting them in the workplan and budget - will help avoid challenges later on.
- **Learn and Adapt**: The Local Works program recommends that the MEL Plan be reviewed and revised on an annual basis during activity implementation to determine if all information and indicators are still useful and appropriate in the local context. While it is valuable to maintain consistent indicators over the life of the project to track performance over time, partners can - with COR/AOR approval - change or drop indicators.

1. INTRODUCTION

This section introduces the Activity MEL plan and provides summary background information relevant to the MEL plan. It gives an overview of the local context, the activity's goal and anticipated long term outcomes.

Instructions:
Write a brief introduction about your local context that is relevant to activity implementation and MEL. **Rather than drafting new content, we suggest that you copy and paste the most relevant language on the activity's purpose or summary of the technical scope of work** (Section C) in your award document.

1.1 Activity Theory of Change and Logic Model or Results Framework [Optional but Recommended]

Activity Theory of Change:

Instructions:
Include a summary description of the activity theory of change from activity planning documents (e.g. your concept paper, application, or outputs of a co-creation).

This section should include an IF -> THEN, or an IF -> AND -> THEN statement that articulates the causal linkages between your interventions and your desired long-term results. For example: “IF we create a forum for local advocacy initiatives to share their strategies with one another, AND we provide mentoring in communications and government engagement, THEN initiatives will gain influence over local government policy.” This worksheet may help you develop your theory of change.

Fill in your own activity theory of change statement here:

IF:

AND (Optional):

THEN:

Activity Logic Model or Results Framework:
Insert a graphic of the activity logic model or results framework. If helpful, you can include additional descriptions of monitoring, evaluation, and learning efforts that correspond to various components of the logic model. Your USAID AOR or MEL Specialist can facilitate a session to help you develop this! (Note to AORs: Contact your Washington-based Local Works Point of Contact if you would like support facilitating theory of change development with a partner.)

Your logic model might look linear, like this:

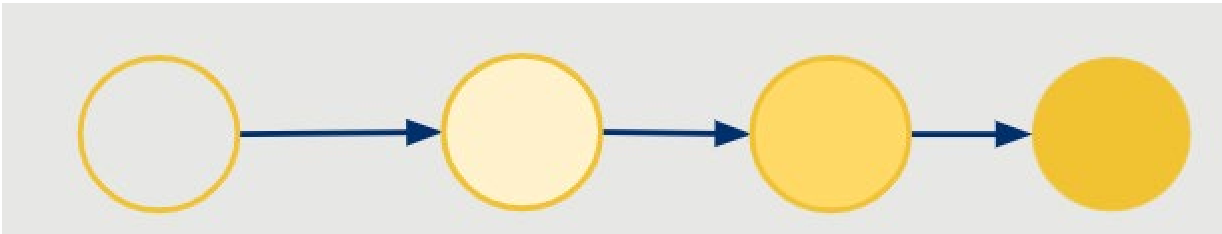

Figure 1. Linear logic model

Or, it might be non-linear, with multiple activities influencing results, reinforcing feedback loops, or some of the expected results outside of your control, like this:

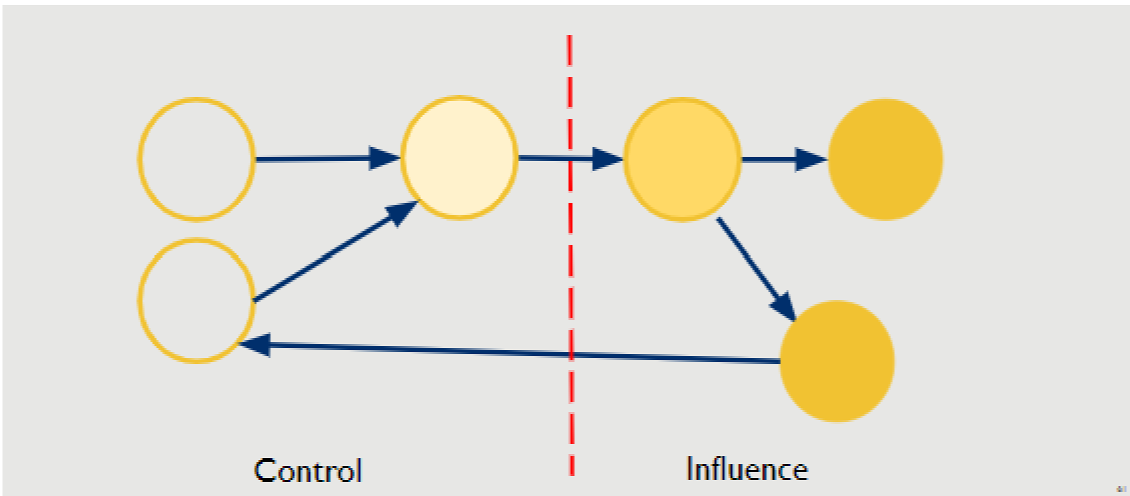

Figure 2. Non-linear logic model

2. Monitoring Plan

This section provides information on how your activity will monitor the performance of the activity and contextual factors that may affect your achievement of intended results. This includes four elements: performance indicators, context indicators (optional), data management plan, and collection of participant feedback. For additional information on Monitoring at USAID, visit the USAID Monitoring Toolkit.

2.1 Performance Monitoring [Required]

Instructions:
In this section, describe the performance indicators on which you will report.

The indicators should include monitoring the quantity, quality, and timeliness of **outputs**.[1] Outputs are "what you do," or what is immediately produced because of your activity. A few examples include people fed, participants trained, or knowledge-sharing events organized. Monitoring may also include relevant **outcomes**[2] to which the activity is expected to contribute. Outcomes are typically a result of more than one intervention or output, and they usually require a longer time period to be observed. Examples of outcomes are increased recycling behavior among community members, decreased stunting among malnourished children, farmers applying new agricultural practices, higher annual income, or change in local government policy. **If your activity is short and you do not expect to see outcome-level results within the period of performance, it may be most appropriate to include only output indicators.**

Select or develop output indicators- and as appropriate, outcome indicators - that rely on a mix of quantitative and qualitative data. For example, you might choose indicators such as:

- "Number of organizations receiving mentoring." This is an output-level indicator that reflects quantitative data (i.e. you can count the number of organizations mentored)
- "Number of organizations showing improved performance in government engagement." This is an outcome-level indicator. It could reflect quantitative data that serves as evidence of improved organizational performance (for example, number of improved local government policies), **or** it could reflect qualitative data (for example, feedback from supported organizations that suggests they have better relationships with government actors)

The Local Works team recommends that partners select **no fewer than five and no more than ten indicators.** For each indicator, you must include a Performance Indicator Reference Sheet (PIRS) detailing how the indicator will be measured. You must also set baseline values (or describe a plan for collecting baseline data). **See Annex I and Annex II for additional detail on these requirements.**

Consider how you can involve other local stakeholders in choosing or developing indicators. You can brainstorm with them to understand what would be most useful and relevant for their own decision-making. You can also adopt indicators that local private sector, government, or civil society actors already use.

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[1] A tangible, immediate, and intended product or consequence of an activity within USAID's control. ADS Glossary, page 185.

[2] A higher level or end result at the assistance objective level. Development Objectives should be outcomes. An outcome is expected to have a positive impact on and lead to change in the development situation of the host country. ADS Glossary, page 184.

Finally, please provide an overview of why you have selected your specific performance monitoring indicators. For example: "We have selected these five indicators based on feedback from activity participants, the local district government and USAID during our design phase. We plan to re-assess these indicators at the end of Year One to determine if they will still be useful and relevant to our activity."

Data Collection Methods

In this section, describe the methods used to collect indicator data. Possible methods include:

- Direct observation (e.g. observing training attendance)
- In-depth interviews with activity participants or other stakeholders
- Focus group discussions with activity participants
- Surveys
- Workshops involving storytelling about activity outcomes (e.g. Most Significant Change approach)
- Participant journals (e.g. Outcome Mapping approach)
- Tracking third-party indicators published by government, international organizations, or civil society
- Many other approaches - be creative!

2.2 Context Monitoring [Optional]

Monitoring aspects of the political, economic, social, or environmental context in which you work can be helpful for knowing when you should adapt your activity in response to contextual changes. For example, if your activity is focused on citizen advocacy, you might wish to track indicators from Freedom House or the Varieties of Democracy (V-Dem) index, which provide data on national-level changes that may impact your programming. Like performance monitoring, context monitoring may include a range of quantitative and qualitative methods including direct observation, surveys, interviews, and tracking of third-party indicators.

Describe any context monitoring you plan to conduct in this section.

If you decide to track context indicators, these should be reported in the summary list of indicators in Annex I. Context indicator Reference Sheets (CIRS) may be included in Annex II.

2.3 Performance and Context Monitoring Data Management Plan [Required]

*Note: This section is required, as detailed in ADS 579.

Instructions:
In this subsection you should briefly describe:

- How you will manage the performance and context monitoring data you plan to collect during implementation. For example, if you collect data by paper survey or an attendance sheet, how and when will you review the data to ensure it is accurate, and then enter the data into a database?
- Describe the systems and formats in which data will be stored, including any data security protocols for sensitive health or demographic information to ensure that information is being safeguarded.

2.4 Collection of Participant Feedback [Required]

*Note: This section is required, as detailed in [ADS 201](ADS 201).

Instructions:
In this section you should briefly describe:

- How you will collect feedback directly from individuals participating in your activity. This feedback should provide information on the quality and relevance of the activity, and any recommendations to adapt or improve the activity. (Note: This may include the same data collection methods as described in Section 2.1 ("Performance Monitoring"), but please elaborate specifically on your plans for collecting data on participants' perceptions of the activity.)
- This section should detail **how** you will collect participant feedback, from **whom,** and **how often you will do so,** as well as what you will do with the feedback you hear.
- Remember, collecting participant feedback does not need to be a complicated data collection effort. You can use regular site visits to ask participants a few questions you have developed in advance, take notes, then reflect on what you learned afterwards.
    - Consider asking about:
        - Usefulness of the activity
            - Example: Ask stakeholders which was the most useful service they received through the activity, and which was the least useful (if they had to choose).
        - Outcomes
            - Example: Ask stakeholders for relative agreement or disagreement with statements like "Because of this mentorship, I am more successful in advocacy work."
            - Example: Ask open-ended questions like, "Are you doing anything differently because of this activity? If yes, what?"

    - After you complete the mini-interviews or discussions with participants, you can reflect within your team on the following questions, and record your discussion:
        - What did we hear that we expected, and what did we hear that we did not expect?
        - What are the reasons for the feedback we received/results we heard about?
        - Based on this, what should we keep doing? What should we change? When will we make these changes?
- **Don't forget! Close the feedback loop!** How will you "close the feedback loop" by sharing what you learn - and any actions you are taking based on that learning - with your program participants? By discussing learning with participants, you can derive deeper meaning, and get their ideas on what to do in response to the learning. It also helps improve future data quality, as stakeholders see you are paying attention to their opinions. Describe how you will share your learning back with stakeholders or community members in a way that is accessible to them. You can consider:
    - Short written products or slide decks (these are often good for government stakeholders or other stakeholders with whom you have a more formal relationship)
    - Interactive presentations or workshops, with lots of time for discussion and answering questions (these may be a good fit for community meetings, for example).

Need more ideas? Check out these tips on planning for, collecting, and using stakeholder feedback, developed for Local Works partners. (Note that this resource is on the USAID Google Drive, so partners should email their AOR for access.)

3. COLLABORATING, LEARNING, AND ADAPTING PLAN [OPTIONAL BUT RECOMMENDED]

Collaborating, learning and adapting (CLA) is a set of practices that help USAID and partners improve development effectiveness. The systematic application of CLA approaches enables USAID - and partners! - to be an effective learning organization and thereby a more effective development organization. Learn more from USAID's CLA Toolkit.

Instructions:

Since Local Works is a learning-focused program, this section is highly recommended. This section explains your activity's approach to learning from monitoring data, evaluation findings (if applicable) and other learning activities, and how you plan to adapt your activity in response to new learning and knowledge. This section should detail **what** you will do to learn from your activity, **who** will be involved, and **how often** you will do these things. Here are some **examples** of collaborating, learning, and adapting activities you can include here. You do NOT need to include all of these, and are welcome to choose different types of learning activities not represented here.

Learning meetings/events: Describe how you will create opportunities to "pause and reflect" on what you are learning and what you will do with that information. Examples include:

- Quarterly Reflection: A quarterly reflection is an opportunity for your team to discuss how the activities are going. It does not necessarily focus on a specific event or task like a Before Action Review or After Action Review (see below), but covers everything that has happened in your activity over the last quarter. Questions your team can discuss include:
    - What have we done over the last quarter (i.e. what tasks have we carried out)?
    - What are our biggest 3-5 successes over the last quarter? What are the key factors that made those things a success?
    - What were the biggest 2-3 challenges over the last quarter (or things that did not go as well as we planned)?
    - What strategies can we use over the next quarter(s) to adapt our activities in response to these challenges?
- Before Action Review (BAR): A BAR is a discussion your team has, either internally or with program participants or other stakeholders, before you do something. You can structure your discussion around questions like:
    - What are our intended results?
    - What will success look like?
    - What challenges do we think we might encounter?
    - What have we learned from similar experiences in the past, and are we using that learning here to help us achieve our goals?
- After Action Review (AAR): An AAR is the same as a BAR, but done after you carry out some event or task. You can conduct it with your internal team, or include external stakeholders. Questions to structure your discussion can include:
    - What did we expect to happen, and what actually happened?
    - What were the reasons for the results we observed?
    - Next time we do this, what will we do in the same way? What should we change?

    - Are there any immediate actions we need to take now that we have reflected?
- The Locally Led Development Spectrum and Checklist: The Locally Led Development Checklist is a pause and reflect tool, designed to help USAID Missions and partners consider and adopt locally led approaches at every stage of the development process. Its purpose is to facilitate reflection. The tool is flexible and can be applied to any step, stage, or component of an activity. It can be used by partners to reflect on their engagement with sub-partners, networks, and constituents. The link includes a facilitation guide to assist in using the tool.

Data analysis and reflection: Describe how you will make sense of the data and information you gather through your regular performance monitoring. How often do you plan to analyze the data? Who will be involved in analyzing or making sense of the data (not only on your team, but also among your activity participants and other key stakeholders?) Your analysis does not need to include advanced statistical methods; simply describe how you will make sense of the data you collect.

Learning questions: You can consider developing specific learning questions about how your activity will influence or achieve intended results. What do you NOT know now about stakeholders' capacities, motivations, or opportunities, or about the context that affects your results? If you develop learning questions, you should propose specific activities (such as analyses, reflection events, an evaluation, a stakeholder consultation) that will help you answer those learning questions.

Knowledge sharing and closing feedback loops: How will you document the new knowledge you gain throughout this activity? How will you share it with USAID? How will you share it with external stakeholders, including local program participants? Include information on any events you will organize or products you will create for sharing knowledge. Some ideas you might consider:

- Hold workshops to reflect on the data you collected. You could hold these in the capital city for government stakeholders, or in rural locations where program participants live and work. Give program participants an opportunity to reflect on the data and trends, and share their own ideas about those trends.
- Use data visualizations to help individuals understand the data.
- Share short (1-2 page) documents or presentations to share with stakeholders who are unlikely to read a full report.

Think carefully about how you will "close feedback loops" by sharing learning back with the individuals or organizations who provided the data!

Adaptive management: How often will you consider revisions to your strategy or implementation based on new learning from program monitoring, participant feedback, and other sources? How will you do this, and who will be involved?

For more information and ideas, visit the USAID CLA toolkit.

4. Evaluation Plan [Optional]

As defined in the USAID Evaluation Toolkit, evaluation is “the systematic collection and analysis of strategy, project, and activity information to improve effectiveness and inform decisions about current and future programming.” This is distinct from assessment, which describes an informal review of projects, or a data collection and analysis process designed to examine country or sector context to inform project design.

Evaluations are either internal (conducted by an implementing partner’s own staff) or external (conducted by an outside firm or consultant). USAID will most likely advise the implementing partner if and when an external evaluation is planned. As such, this section focuses on internal evaluation.

Within the Local Works program, internal evaluations are **not required**, but you may choose to conduct an internal evaluation if you think it will generate useful learning for your organization and your activity.

Instructions:
Before deciding to conduct an internal evaluation, discuss and answer the following questions:

- What do you want to learn from this evaluation?
- How will you use the data, learning and findings from an evaluation to adapt your programming?
- How will you close the feedback loop (that is, share your learning) with the individuals and organizations from whom you collect data?

Discuss these questions with your AOR/COR to make a decision on whether to conduct an internal evaluation. USAID can work closely with you to plan this. If you choose to conduct an internal evaluation, describe your preliminary plans in this section. You do not need to have every detail planned at the beginning of your activity, but you should address the following points:

- **Possible Evaluation Questions:** While your questions of interest may change as your activity progresses, enter 3-5 possible evaluation questions here. These should be questions specific to your activity, and which would generate learning that helps you improve or adapt your activity.
- **Start Date:** Anticipated start date for your evaluation. You may wish to conduct an evaluation approximately halfway through your activity to inform the second half. Alternatively, you may conduct it towards the end of your activity to answer questions about the activity results.
- **Participatory Methods:** How will you involve other local stakeholders to develop evaluation questions, participate in data collection or analysis, interpret findings, and/or co-develop recommendations?

The USAID Evaluation Toolkit includes information that may be helpful for this section.

5. Studies and Assessments [Optional]

The USAID ADS Glossary distinguishes assessments from evaluations, and defines an assessment as, "A forward-looking process designed to examine country or sector context to inform strategic planning or the design of a project, or an informal review of a strategy, project, or activity." Examples of assessments include private sector landscape assessments, political economy analyses, feasibility studies, or reviews of the evidence on a particular topic (for example, governance in Armenia).

Instructions:
In this section, outline key questions that the assessments will help answer, and how the answers to those questions will inform activity design or implementation. This may link to any learning questions you have included in the CLA section of this MEL Plan.

6. MEL Plan Change Log [**Optional**]

This section includes a table to describe significant adaptations that are made to the Activity MEL plan over time based on learning. Examples of significant adaptations include adding or dropping an indicator, adding or removing a section of the MEL Plan, or choosing to conduct an evaluation or assessment:

Date	Change to:	Brief description of change:
Enter the effective date of change here	Note the section of the Activity MEL plan that you have changed. If an indicator has been changed, include the indicator number.	Summarize the change that was made to the Activity MEL plan and the reason the change was made here. This will help support knowledge management and learning.

Annex I Indicator Summary Table [Optional]

This table includes a row for each indicator included in the MEL Plan. The purpose of the Indicator Summary Table is to provide your team and USAID with a summary picture of the full set of performance indicators used in your activity. You are welcome to adapt the information in the table based on what is most relevant to your needs. Additional information on each column header is found here.

A note on baseline: You should plan to conduct your baseline within six months of activity start. If you do not have your baseline value when submitting your initial MEL plan, add the estimated date of baseline and leave the value blank. You can complete it once you collect baseline data. For most output-level indicators (for example, Number of people trained), your baseline will be zero.

A note on targets: Targets should be ambitious but achievable. If you do not know your baseline for a given indicator, you can leave the target blank, and fill it in once you have your baseline data. While it can be challenging to set targets at the beginning of an activity - especially for outcome-level indicators - consider the past performance of related programming or similar activities, as well as your intended timeline for activities and how much time it will take to observe change. To the extent possible, involve your sub-partners, government counterparts, or other relevant stakeholders: a collaborative target setting process will not only help with setting ambitious-yet-achievable targets, it will also help build buy-in so that the targets are useful!

Indicator	Type of Indicator	Data Source	Frequency	Unit of Measure	Baseline		Target (if applicable)	
					Date	Value	Date	Value
Example: 3.4.1.(a) Neonatal mortality rate (number of deaths of infants during the first 28 days of life per 1,000 live births) in childbirth facilities in the southern region of East Tambou.	Performance/ Custom	Survey of child birth facility vital registration data by the MCH-Tambou Project.	Quarterly	Number per 1,000	01/2016	55.3	09/2021	40.0

ANNEX II: INDICATOR REFERENCE SHEETS [REQUIRED]

Instructions:

All performance indicators require a Performance Indicator Reference Sheet (PIRS). Complete Performance Indicator Reference Sheets (PIRS) for all indicators in the Activity MEL Plan. For any Standard Foreign Assistance Indicators (F indicators), your AOR/COR will provide the PIRS. For any custom indicators, you will need to complete your own Performance Indicator Reference Sheets (PIRS) for each indicator. We suggest no more than 5 to 10 (maximum) performance indicators.

Context indicators are recommended (but not required) to have a Context Indicator Reference Sheet (CIRS). They may be attached in this annex.

ANNEX III: DATA COLLECTION INSTRUMENTS [OPTIONAL]

For major data collection efforts, such as a questionnaire or survey conducted semi-annually to collect performance monitoring data, the data collection instruments can be attached here. You may amend your MEL Plan to add or revise instruments over time.